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Act Now on Aid to Contras or Their Cause Will Be Lost

By PENN KEMBLE

Who are the *contras?*

Late last month members of a nonpartisan citizens' group working to build public support for democracy in Central America journeyed by Jeep and helicopter to the contras' mountain camps along the border of Nicaragua and Honduras. What we found was not what we had been led to expect.

The Nicaraguan resistance is above all a youth movement. Its political spokesmen in the Central American capitals and a handful of its top military commanders are veterans of the struggle against the dictatorship of Anatasio Somoza or of Somoza's National Guard—a curious mixture. But among the soldiers and field commanders whom we talked to in the mountains, barely a handful were over 30 years old. Most were children and adolescents during the Somoza era.

This bears witness to a chapter of Nicaragua's recent history that has somehow escaped our understanding here in the United States. It is true that when it began in 1981 the contra force was composed largely of former national guardsmen and adventurers assembled by the Central Intelligence Agency, the military dictatorship of Argentina's Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, and wealthy, embittered Nicaraguan exiles in Miami.

But in 1982 the revolutionary Sandinista government began to impose its Cuban-style regimen on Nicaragua's small farmers, workers and professional classes. This provoked a powerful rebellion that brought thousands of new recruits to the contra army: recruits who have been transforming it from a proxy force into an authentic national liberation movement.

The spirit in the military camps, despite great hardships, is surprisingly good. Young trainees awakened us at 4:30 a.m. singing the Nicaraguan national anthem, and after dinner held their version of the "Gong Show": singing duets of their own lyrics put to popular tunes until their fellow soldiers applauded or hooted them offstage. They were not shy in conversation. They asked thoughtful questions, were clear in their beliefs and showed flashes of bewilderment about politics in the United States. We encountered none of the sullen apathy that one finds among so many of the young and the poor in Central America.

It was hard to see how these soldiers could be accused of being mercenaries, as the Sandinista Front likes to label them. They ate rice, beans and tortillas, with small amounts of meat on rare occasions. Their boots and clothes were badly worn, and their uniforms were hardly uniform. They slept on wooden planks, usually with nothing but plastic sheets to shield them from the nighttime cold and damp. The infirmary had no antibiotics or vitamins—only some packages of Tylenol. Most of the soldiers, even the youngest, had already seen a year or more of combat.

This is no life to leave home for, even if home is a hut in the bush, unless you are fighting for something that you believe in.

We talked with many about why they had come to the mountains. These young men (and women) are not fighting for theories of *laissez-faire* economics or because they agree about the necessity of maintaining the superpower balance. They are there because their families' farms have been confiscated, their unions broken, their religious beliefs scorned, their daily lives invaded by the totalitarian state.

A young doctor, a former high health official of the Sandinista government, told how third-rate Cuban health personnel now are running Nicaragua's hospitals. A teen-age girl explained how the Sandinista's literacy campaign, which boasts a prize from the multinational bureaucrats of UNESCO, has turned all education into crude ideological indoctrination.

Our visit to the resistance forces in the field revealed their weaknesses as well as their strengths. The *campesino* fighters make good riflemen, but there is a serious shortage of literate and semi-skilled personnel for medical services, intelligence, communications, administration and the maintenance and repair of mechanical equipment. There are not enough politically trained cadres to project the contras' democratic message into Nicaragua's towns and cities, or to build a network for political resistance.

These shortcomings reflect the difficulties that some contra leaders and many in the U.S. government have had in keeping pace with the transformation of the movement from a proxy force into a popular insurrection. The contras could probably recruit the people they need and strengthen their political effectiveness by broadening their leadership and emphasizing their democratic and nationalist purposes.

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If the United States gives military aid, we should insist on such steps. But if we do give aid, and all in our delegation think that we should, we have to give it promptly and generously. If we haggle and delay, we will be subjecting these brave young men and women to pointless risks. If we are not willing to act now, and act decisively, the honorable alternative is to tell them that we think their cause is lost.

This will reveal more about us than it does about them.

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